

## every night my mind is running around her by magneticwave

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** F/M, M/M, Multi

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven/Dustin Henderson, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Mike Wheeler/Lucas Sinclair

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2016-10-20

**Updated:** 2016-10-20

**Packaged:** 2022-04-01 21:28:16

**Rating:** General Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 12,886

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

In which Nancy gets married, Lucas gets hot, and Dustin gets to give lots of people advice that he's only moderately qualified to dispense.

## **every night my mind is running around her**

Dustin has been waiting for this day for a long time.

“What’s this?” he says when Mike throws the envelope over his shoulder. Mike makes a deep, full-throated groaning noise and even though Dustin doesn’t look away from his desktop monitor, he can hear the squeaking of his bed as Mike throws himself bodily on top of it.

“What do you think,” Mike says listlessly.

Dustin flicks a glance down to the envelope--fancy paper, calligraphy that’s hard to read upside down, return address is HAWKINS, IN. “Nancy?” he says.

“Yeah,” Mike says to the ceiling.

“Makes sense,” Dustin says. He shrugs his left arm to get the envelope and its contents out of the way. This paper for Shepard is not going to write itself and Dustin was an idiot who spent the whole weekend on Mike and Will’s couch playing a new campaign instead of outlining his final paper.

“Makes *sense* ?” Mike hisses, but in a listless way.

“They were always end-game,” Dustin says with the confidence of a man who has thought about this a lot in the last decade.

“Were not,” Mike says. He’s barely throwing any inflection into this.

“Were too,” Dustin says. “Most people marry their college sweethearts because college experiences have the strongest influence on their eventual emotional and personal trajectories. The most important thing to ever happen to Nancy happened in high school--ergo, she’s marrying her high school sweetheart.” Dustin squints at the screen of his monitor. “Does this sentence sound right to you? ‘Although the use of codebreakers was instrumental in the eventual defeat of the--’”

“That’s so wrong,” Mike says roughly. From the bedspring squealing,

Dustin assumes he's just sat up. "If that's true, I'd--marry you!"

"This sentence does not have a verb," Dustin says to himself. "Shit." He tries to reframe his thought in his head-- *the eventual suppression of German activities* --no, that sounds weird. Maybe it's the fault of the *although* ?

"He called her a whore!" Mike continues.

His train of thought now rudely derailed, Dustin sighs and spins his desk chair around so he can perform the rest of this farcical conversation face-to-face. "Technically," Dustin points out, "he didn't say anything when somebody else called her a slut."

"That's basically the same thing!" Mike says. His eyes are hard and he doesn't look like he remembers any of the numerous times he's called Nancy bad names himself. Obviously Mike has never called his sister a whore, but he *did* once say that she had the processing capability of an astrolabe, which is frankly a little more rude.

"Look," Dustin says, putting his hands on his knees, and Mike holds up a hand.

"No," he says.

"No what?" Dustin says.

"No, I don't want to have a 'Dustin tells Mike to come to Jesus' talk," Mike says.

Dustin says, "So, what, you want to wallow?"

"I want to wallow," Mike confirms. He sighs huffily and flops back onto Dustin's bed, which was probably manufactured during World War II and doesn't have the structural integrity to survive this kind of poor treatment. "This is so dumb!" he says, like they're still twelve and Nancy is still his irritating (and hot) older sister who has somehow managed to tightrope the line between being a nerd and being sexually attractive. *What's the difference?* Mike had howled through most of eleventh grade. *We have the exact same GPA and basically all the same genes!*

It had taken Dustin years--like, actual years--plus puberty to figure out the difference, which was that Nancy is Indiana Jones. You can only have one Indiana Jones. It's the rules. After the first one, everybody who tries to be Indiana Jones is a phony loser.

"Nancy deserves to be happy," Dustin tells Mike. This was anyway the end of his come to Jesus talk, so even if they skip the middle where Dustin crams Mike's face into the truth of the matter, at least they're getting to the important part. "You know that, because you're not a sociopath."

"Ugh," Mike groans, grabbing Dustin's pillow and mashing it over his face. "Ugh!"

"Do you want me to call Will?" Dustin says over Mike's hysterical groaning and attempts to suffocate himself. "I seriously have to write this paper, Mike."

"Mmph!" yells Mike.

Dustin calls Will.

~

Will shows up with Lucas in tow, which is surprising because Lucas is supposed to be in Wisconsin.

"What are you doing here?" Dustin asks when he opens the door to his room and Lucas is towering behind Will, looking sweaty and very--muscular, as he does these days.

"Thanks for the welcome mat, asshole," Lucas says. "As always, really showing how much you care."

"You're supposed to be in Wisconsin! That's a legitimate question!" Dustin points out as Will and Lucas shoulder past him. Will keeps going towards the bed and Mike's prone body; Lucas pauses to kick off his shoes. "Did somebody die and they sent you all home?"

"How much you don't know about ROTC continually amazes me," Lucas says. He's wearing a sweatshirt that's stretched across his (ridiculous) shoulders and both it and his jeans look like they've been

recently ironed. "Nobody died, Dustin. We came back last night because there were tornado warnings."

"So somebody *could've* died," Dustin says sagely. Lucas rolls his eyes and stomps off to join Will.

"Mike, come on," Will is saying to the pile of Dustin's comforter and pillows that's groaning gently. "Why are you being such a drama queen?"

The pillows quiver and mumble something that Dustin can't catch. As much as Dustin always loves to know what's going on--maybe Mike thinks that dispensing advice comes naturally, but Dustin has to do all his own recon--he really, really has to write this paper. "I'm off," he tells the three of them, wagging a floppy disk in their general direction. "If you leave, lock up, okay? I don't want Jen-hao tearing me another asshole about dorm safety."

"Yeah, yeah," Lucas says, flapping a dismissive hand at him.

It's unbelievable that Dustin still hangs out with these assholes. He flips them off, even though nobody is looking at him, and then takes the stairs down to the first floor so he doesn't have to socialize with any of his floor neighbors. Half of them are also in Shepard's spring seminar and as far as Dustin can tell they all finished their final papers somewhere between last week and a month ago, the fucking overachievers, and he doesn't want to deal with their scandalized responses to him still working on it.

The only computer lab that's open until midnight is across campus; Dustin would take his bike but the inner tube on the back wheel is still shot and he hasn't had time to pick up a replacement. Thanks to the humidity, he gets to the library a sweaty mess and has to fan himself with his notebook as he waits for the elevator up to the fourth floor. At this point Dustin is resigned to being a mess of a physical specimen, so there's no accompanying wave of embarrassment when the elevator dings open and there as a witness to his damp armpits is El, holding a tuna sandwich that she's clearly just gotten from one of the vending machines in the basement.

"Hey," Dustin says, tromping in along with a wave of weedy-looking

freshmen and a surly reference librarian with a cart of stock for reshelving.

“Hello,” El says, not pausing in the process of delicately peeling back the cling film around her sandwich.

“You’re gonna get food poisoning from those one day,” Dustin tells her. He always tells her this.

“No,” El says, taking a quick, ferocious bite of her revealed sandwich. “I don’t think so.” She chews, swallows, and grins at Dustin in the time it takes for the elevator to go from the second to third floor; she has the same tooth density as a great white shark.

“Ew,” Dustin says. “Who taught you manners?”

“You,” El says around another bite of her sandwich. “How is your paper going?”

“Oh god,” Dustin says, smacking his forehead with the palm of his hand. “It’s a mess. Shepard’s gonna flunk my ass and then I’m going to have to repeat this entire year over again.” The elevator *dings* loudly and the doors open onto the fourth floor; Dustin and El have to shoulder their way past the freshmen and the reference librarian’s cart. “I guess you’ll still be here to keep me company.”

“Ha!” El barks. She shoves the last of her sandwich into the corner of her mouth and balls up the mayonnaise-smeared cling film to throw away in the trash can just outside of the lab, which is carefully positioned under the sign that says NO FOOD IN THE COMPUTER LAB. As a person who basically lives in this air-conditioned box, El has perfected the art of consuming sustenance on the elevator ride up from the basement vending machines. “If I finish this proof, not even Constantine can trap me here past next spring.”

“Yeah, okay, ‘trap,’” Dustin says, hooking air quotes around the word. He holds open the door to the lab for El, who steps through and throws a wave to the work study student behind the front desk. “You nerd. You love it here.”

“Hey El,” says the work study student. There are literal stars in his

eyes, although that could be a reflection from the fluorescent lights. He's breathy up until he sees Dustin come in after her; then he says, "You need to sign in," with the approximate enthusiasm of a post office clerk.

"Hi Mark," Dustin says, exaggerating patience he doesn't feel. El doesn't bother waiting for him, already weaving her way down the row of machines as Dustin pauses to grab a pencil and clock in. "How's it going?"

"We're closing half an hour early tonight for server maintenance," Mark says.

"I meant, like, in your life," Dustin says, scribbling the time next to his name and student ID number.

"I know what you meant," Mark says. "You're going to get booted off at 11:30, don't try to weasel out extra time."

"Like I would ever," Dustin tries; Mark glares at him.

In the back of the lab, El is set up at her usual station in her usual pose: her backpack has vomited notebooks and pens with chewed ends all over the nearest rolling chair and she's kicked off her shoes.

"Gross," Dustin says, looking at the nail of her big toe pointedly. It's peeking out from a hole in a yellow and red striped sock, pale from washing. It looks like one of Mike's socks, because the heel is up behind El's ankle, disappearing into the hem of her sweatpants. "Do you know how often they clean in here?"

"Yes," El says, not looking away from the screen.

"Gross," Dustin reiterates. Since none of the other idiot weirdos that comprise their friend group seem invested in personal hygiene--or, well, Lucas is pretty well-kept but he's not really into proselytizing--Dustin takes it as his personal responsibility to occasionally remind El that she doesn't live in the woods anymore.

"Yes, Dustin," El says patiently. "I know." She has a yellow legal pad in front of her, with the keyboard to the computer shoved up behind it. Dustin passed multi-variable calculus his second semester here and

then stopped taking math classes because he fell in with the classics dweebs; whatever El is working on might as well be Swedish. She's really into it, for what that's worth.

Dustin works on his paper about WWII code-breakers for four hours, until he comes back to himself somewhere in the middle of a section about modulo-2 addition and realizes he's curled over the keyboard like the hunchback of Notre Dame, his shoulders up near his ears and his chest aching from his contorted position. "What time is it?" he asks blearily of the general air around him.

"10:45," El says absently to his left. "How's your paper going?"

"*Ugh*," Dustin says forcefully. He looks at his computer, his line of thought totally disrupted, and then at El, who is chewing on the end of her pen hard enough that she's going to have a leakage problem in the next twenty minutes. "You wanna go get some fries?"

El looks at her notepad, then up at Dustin. "*God* yes," she says finally, fervently, and she laughs as she throws her half-chewed pen down on top of her legal pad. Often El looks startled by her own laughter, as if she isn't expecting the noise to come from inside of her; Dustin's favorite times the ones, like now, are when she doesn't look surprised at all, like laughing is completely normal.

~

Everybody's parents offer to come up and get them--the Wheelers call Mike's floor's phone so often that his RA starts coming up to the seventh floor to get Dustin when Mike's not around--but it seems like a massive waste of time. Everybody packs up and then they take El's busted '88 Voyager back to Hawkins bursting at the seams with five people's general junk. Dustin's pretty sure his dice are mating when he's not looking, since when he packs up the contents of his desk the bottom drawer has random d20s rattling around that he's never even seen before.

"Is that possible?" he asks El from the middle row of seats, where he and Will and Lucas' massive shoulders are crammed in because Mike, despite being the skinniest one, had called shotgun.



“No,” El says. She’s staring straight ahead down 52, her hands at ten and two on the steering wheel. El takes driving seriously, the same way she takes her powers seriously: she knows what it’s like to kill people. Teaching her to drive had been a nightmare and only Lucas had braved it out to the end; Dustin had tapped out the Sunday night that he tried to teach her how to parallel park in a deserted Buehler’s parking lot and she’d gotten mad enough at him yelling *you’re going to hit the boxes!* to roll the car.

“Yes,” Will says, equally serious, to Dustin’s left. He’d gotten stuck with the middle seat because his mouth had still been full of peanut butter toast when they were calling seats. “Color is an inherited trait, I bet you can even figure out who the parents are--”

“Fuck you,” Dustin cuts him off, pushing the side of Will’s head so that it bounces off of Lucas’ shoulder on the other side.

El says, “No pushing!” and Dustin stops, holding up both of his hands in front of him.

“No pushing,” he agrees, “no pushing, sorry, El.”

“I’m going to turn this minivan around,” she says through narrow lips. “Then you all can *hitchhike* back to Hawkins.”

“Mom!” Will whines, and they all start laughing, even El once she’s finished glaring out the front windshield.

It’s an hour drive, closer to an hour and a half with El at the wheel, and it passes relatively quickly. El drops Mike off first, then Lucas, then Will. It takes another hour because they have to get out at everybody’s house, unload their suitcases and milk crates of stuff, and then hug good-bye. Mrs. Byers tries to guilt them into coming in for dinner but Dustin’s parents would straight up murder him and El says that Hop’s expecting her.

“Do you think we’re invited to the rehearsal dinner?” Dustin asks El when Will’s gone and Dustin’s managed to claim the front seat. It’s twelve minutes to Dustin’s place from Will’s, ten if you run the red light on Parkinson, but El has never met a traffic law for which she wasn’t an insane stickler.

"I don't know," El says. Half a block away from the next intersection, she flicks her turn signal. "What's a rehearsal dinner?"

"Like a mini wedding," Dustin says dismissively. He has a dozen first cousins and all of them had gotten married when he was in high school, in the four worst and most boring summers of Dustin's life. "They'll do a practice run and then have a dinner, but the groom's parents have to pay for it instead of the bride's."

El makes a small face, her lips twisted. "That sounds like a waste of time," she says, looking both ways twice before turning left onto Ashland. "And money," she adds a second later.

"The whole point of weddings is to be an expensive spectacle," Dustin tells her. "To be honest the whole rehearsal-wedding-registry thing is way more traditional than I would've expected for Nancy. I'm surprised she's not, like, eloping to Ethiopia or something."

El takes advantage of looking to her right to flick Dustin an irritated look. "What's in Ethiopia?" she asks, pointedly. This is fair--Ethiopia is on his brain because Dustin, handing in his final paper, had gotten into a clusterfuck of an argument about Andromeda and Perseus with Shepard, whose Contextualization of Myth class Dustin'll be TAing in the fall. Dustin's parting shot had been, *The odds on a freshman asking why a princess from Ethiopia is white in the Titian painting is so high that I feel extremely confident betting you two rounds at Timmy O'Toole's*. Shepard had said, tired, *Leave, Henderson*. Anyway, two weeks ago, Dustin wouldn't have thought Nancy likely to elope there at all.

"Adventure," Dustin says, instead of owning up to his own idiot brain processes. "Probably Jonathan," he adds.

El says primly, "Jonathan is in Amazonia."

Dustin points at her and says, "That will never not be creepy."

"Mike told me," El says. "I didn't, you know." They're at the red light on Parkinson, so El takes her left hand off of the steering wheel to waggle her fingers by her head, which is their usual shorthand for her mystical powers. "Nancy wanted to invite him."

“Ooo oooh ,” Dustin says.

“We’re not allowed to talk about Jonathan,” El reminds him.

“This is *so dumb* ,” Dustin mumbles to himself. And then, louder, he adds, “I know we’re not allowed to talk about Jonathan, because I made that rule to keep Mike from having an aneurysm. I just mean *oooh* , because it’s a strong move, inviting your ex-boyfriend to your wedding.”

“They’re friends,” El says. “You invite friends to weddings, don’t you?” This could be a rhetorical question, but sometimes El sounds very sure of things she actually means to verify. Dustin has been friends with El for so long now that it feels like she was always folded into their nerd clique, like she’d been there for every sleepover and A/V club meeting and all of the weekends they’d gone camping out by Castle Byers and eaten PB&J sandwiches that Lucas’ dad had cut the crusts off of; he forgets sometimes that El’s only been a real person for about six years now.

“I’m a real person!” El says, affronted.

“Don’t read my mind!” Dustin says back, equally affronted and also slightly terrified that she’d manage to skim off something else during her casual telepathy demonstration.

“Don’t think so loud!” El says, louder and more affronted.

“I know you’re a real person!” Dustin shoots back. “Jeez. I just mean, you know, a person who interacts with the real world and not psycho government scientists in a creepy lab. Or psycho monsters in a creepy alternative plane of existence. Or psycho--”

“ *Thank* you,” El interrupts. “I understand, it’s all right.”

Dustin stares out of the front windshield, folding his arms across his chest. He doesn’t think about El’s face, lower lip poking out in frustration, doesn’t think about her long, thin fingers, doesn’t think about her laughing--he *does* think about Mike’s socks, another pair of which he couldn’t help notice she was wearing this morning. *El’s wearing Mike’s socks* , Dustin thinks repeatedly, blinking furiously at

his Aunt Rachel's Pomeranian, barking furiously from behind the fence as they drive past.

"I just meant," Dustin says when they've driven half a block--it takes a full forty seconds, because it's a school zone and El is inching along like an octogenarian--"that it feels like you've been around forever. That's all." Thinking, *Mike's socks*, Dustin scowls at himself in the side mirror.

El waits a while to say anything. The only bad part of El going to live with Hop after they'd rescued her from the Upside Down was that she'd learned a lot of her communication skills from a guy who thinks the sign of an active listener is to blink occasionally.

"It also feels that way for me," she finally says. They're inching up to Dustin's house; Dustin can see his parents sitting on the porch, drinking something from a plastic pitcher. It could be lemonade, but it's probably extremely strong mimosas. "Not always, but often it does." She takes a deep breath and continues, "I feel that when you say I was not a real person before I met you and Mike and Lucas that you think I am less of a person now." She says this measured, carefully.

Dustin, who had taught El how to frame *I feel* statements, honestly feels pride swell up in his chest. "I'm sorry," he tells her. "That's my fault, I shouldn't say shit like that. You aren't less of a person, now or ever. That's what Dr. Brenner tried to make you, but it didn't work. Obviously."

El carefully pulls over to the side of the street in front of Dustin's house, turns off the car, engages the parking brake, and then undoes her seatbelt and sort of lunges for Dustin in one full motion, throwing her skinny arms around Dustin's neck. She smells like burnt plastic and tahini and her hair, soft and hanging down around her ears, tickles Dustin's nose. Dustin thinks, with a little bit of despair, *Mike's socks*, and then he puts his arms around El's stomach, holding her for a few seconds.

"Thanks, Dustin," she says, her breath moist across Dustin's neck, and wow okay *Mike's socks Mike's socks Mike's socks*.

"You're welcome," Dustin says, less faintly than he feels but not totally normally. *Henderson, you're fucked*, he thinks, not for the first time.

~

"I was kidding about being invited to the rehearsal dinner," Dustin says when Mike calls an hour later.

"What?" Mike says.

"No, not to you," Dustin tells him, irritated. "Why are we invited to the rehearsal dinner?"

Mike says, sulkily, "I don't know, Nancy told me to invite you."

Dustin, fluent in Mike since age four and Nancy since age twelve, translates, "She thinks you'll throw a tantrum if you're not distracted."

"Hey!" Mike says, annoyance crackling across the line like static.

Across the hall from the main phone, Dustin's mom is curled up on the living room couch reading the Sunday *Chicago Tribune* and polishing off the last of the pitcher that Dustin had, in fact, been correct about being full of champagne. She looks up at Mike's angry buzzing noise and raises an eyebrow. Dustin rolls his eyes exaggeratedly, and she smirks at him before going back to the paper. "Dinner's in five minutes," she calls, loudly enough for it to carry.

"Mike, I gotta go soon," Dustin says, grateful as always for his mom's quick grasp of most situations. "Why don't you just take El?"

"What?" Mike says.

"Your *girlfriend*, Mike," Dustin says, exasperated. "Why don't you just take El? I've met your grandma, I don't ever want to do that again. Let somebody else suffer the Mae Wheeler Experience." He leans around the corner, nearly garrotting himself with the phone cord, to see if his dad is carving the pork loin yet.

"You'd wish my grandma on El?" Mike says, offended.

"I'd wish your grandma on anybody other than me, Mike, that's how bad the situation is. I'd throw anybody else on top of that grenade. Seriously, don't you think it's time that you introduce her as your girlfriend to your family?"

Mike makes a soft humming noise. He's lucky that El learned about interpersonal relationships from Hop, who's been trying ineffectually to date Will's mom for the last five years. He'd be eaten alive by anybody with actual standards.

"Think about it," Dustin suggests, and then he presses the bottom of the receiver to his chest, shouts, "I'm coming!" and pulls it back up to say, "That's dinner, I've gotta go."

"Bye, whatever," Mike says as Dustin hangs up on him.

"What was that?" Dustin's dad calls from the kitchen.

"Nothing," Dustin shouts back. "How long till dinner?"

~

Despite being--or, perhaps, because he is--a history major with delusions of graduate school, Dustin goes back to Hawkins every summer to pick up hours at the Blockbuster on Ventura where he'd worked part time most of high school. This had been pretty convenient back then, since Dustin had occasionally had to blow off work to go save one of his friends from being trapped in a psychic hell dimension--thanks, *Will*--and it continues to be fairly convenient, as far as jobs go, now that Dustin is old and needs money for booze and pot noodle. He usually works 8am to 4pm during the week, the deadest of dead zones for 24hr video rental services, and he's only had to call the cops on strange pervs a handful of times in all of his years working here.

The uniform polos he'd gotten in ninth grade still fit and no, Dustin doesn't want to talk about it.

The phone at the front register rings at 9:35am on Dustin's first Thursday back in Hawkins and Dustin answers, "Hello, Blockbuster Video Rental, this is Dustin, how can I help you," wedging the phone

in between his ear and shoulder so he can keep running the computer inventory at the same time.

“Hello,” the person at the other end of the line says, grave and low. “I was wondering if you had something in stock.”

“Sure,” Dustin says in his cheerful Customer Service voice, “I can check if you’d like. What’s the title?”

“Uh, thanks, it’s, uh, *Cocksuckers Go to Mars* .”

Dustin doesn’t stop running inventory. “Sorry,” he says, still cheery. “Don’t think we have that one. I’d recommend you check inside your own asshole, Lucas.”

“Man, fuck you,” Lucas says, dropping his affected bass tone. One day Lucas’ voice is going to drop down to somewhere in that register for real and Dustin is going to have the last laugh. “What the hell is happening to your voice?”

“It’s called getting good quarterly reviews, Lucas,” Dustin tells him. “Why are you even calling, shouldn’t you be at work?”

“I *am* at work,” Lucas says. “I’m at work, at my co-op at a very nice water treatment plant with interesting opportunities for advancement and guess who just called me at my very own cubicle extension?”

Dustin says, “Who?” absently and pulls another handful of returned videotapes out of the box under the counter. He picks up the first one, pulls the cassette out of the box to make sure the titles match, and then changes its inventory status from *CHECKED OUT* to *IN STOCK - VENTURA* .

“Who do you fuc-- *freaking* think, Dustin?” Lucas hisses. It sounds like he’s cupping his hand around the receiver.

“If anybody heard you ask about cocksuckers before I don’t think they’re going to be shocked by a little f-bomb, Lucas,” Dustin points out. “Oh, hey, they made another sequel to *The Fly* . Number three. Ouch, two thumbs up from the *Springfield Dispatcher* .”

“If you’re guessing Mike, you are in fact incorrect,” Lucas says,

ignoring this very important piece of cultural information like he doesn't have the most obvious crush in the world on Jeff Goldblum. "Nancy called. She sent her dad and Mike to the tailor's yesterday to get their suits fitted and Mike apparently came within seconds of bringing nuclear winter down on the entire wedding party."

Dustin frowns down at the box labeled *DRACULA, BRAM STOCK* . "How did Nancy get your work number?" he asks. "I don't even have that. Okay, three guesses on what's inside this *Dracula* case."

"That's because you would prank call me," Lucas says hypocritically. "Nancy called the main line and asked the front desk to connect her." After a pause, he says, " *Jurassic Park* ."

Dustin holds the receiver away from his mouth, makes a loud fart noise, and puts it back against his ear. "Try again!" he says, deliberately putting on his Customer Service voice again. "Mike's been three seconds away from ripping Harrington's head off for years, what's so different now?"

"Uh, I don't know, maybe because they're getting *married* ?" Lucas hisses. "Uh, *Scent of a Woman* ."

"You're such a sap," Dustin says. "And no. And I know that Mike's having a crisis of faith about this, I meant why is it so different that Nancy's calling you instead of just killing Mike and burying him in the backyard like she normally threatens to do to keep him in line."

There's a long pause, long enough for Dustin to check and inventory two more videotapes, before Lucas says, " *Cape Fear* ."

"Fuck you!" Dustin exclaims, before lowering his voice and looking around to make sure he didn't somehow miss a customer come in. "How did you know?"

"Lucky guess," Lucas says smugly. "Okay, I have a meeting at ten with my supervisor so I have to go, but this is way worse than Mike's usual damage. We should have a Castle Byers meeting about it."

"Ugh," Dustin says. "I have dinner at Aunt Rachel's tonight. I can't make a Castle Byers meeting."



Lucas makes a rude noise. "Does friendship mean nothing to you?"

"*Fine*," Dustin says. He pulls up a handful of boxes and starts sorting through them for any labeled *CAPE FEAR*. "But nosies on not bringing dinner."

~

Will brings a huge Tupperware of his mom's Tofu Lentil Surprise.

"Seriously?" Dustin says, staring down into the congealed mass of brown gloop. "Is this even edible? I thought we proved in twelfth grade that it wasn't edible, using science."

Will pulls a handful of spoons out of his backpack, hands them to Dustin, and then goes back in and emerges with an entire loaf of Wonderbread. "Don't trash-talk my mom's cooking, Dustin," he says. "I've seen what passes for a Mrs. Henderson special--two orders of moo shu pork and double the egg rolls."

"First," Dustin says, sticking up his index finger, "my dad cooks, thereby salvaging my household situation, whereas your mom refuses to even acknowledge Hop's existence, let alone set him loose in the kitchen. Second," here he stabs his index finger towards Will's face, "you *love* egg rolls."

Will pushes Dustin's finger away. "It tastes better than it looks, okay?" he says. "Besides, if you call nosies on not bringing dinner like an asshole, you just have to eat whatever somebody chooses to bring."

"Since when is nosies also a moratorium on complaining?" Dustin complains.

"Oh!" El says, coming into the clearing now with her nose in the air like Aunt Rachel's idiot dog. "Tofu Lentil Surprise?"

"You would," Dustin says, disgusted, handing off the Tupperware container as she makes a beeline towards it. "Where're Lucas and Mike?"

El shrugs as Dustin also hands her a spoon. "Back there," she says. If

Dustin sort of concentrates, he can hear rustling in the distance back towards the house, the sound of sneakers tramping through the undergrowth and people's voices. "Thanks," she adds, digging the spoon into the container and shoveling a pile of lentils in mushroom gravy into her mouth.

"How's Blockbuster?" Will asks Dustin, flopping onto the ground next to him. "Still soul-crushing?"

"Listen," Dustin says crabably, "it literally *pays the bills* . No, it's not a fancy engineering internship at a water treatment plant, and yes, I once had to throw a bottle of Mountain Dew at a streaker, but--" He loses track of his train of thought as he turns to glare at Will and sees, behind him in the woods, Mike and Lucas shouting at each other in the distance. Mike is waving his hands around, miming strangling something in the air--probably Steve Harrington--and Lucas is holding his face between his hands, looking like he wants to die.

"But it keeps you in booze," Will says, mildly mocking. "Yeah, yeah, we've heard it." He turns to look at El, who is face-down in the Tofu Lentil Surprise like a starving creature. "How's the station?"

El probably makes a face, because Will laughs. Behind him, Mike has half-turned away from Lucas, his face gone an ugly kind of red, and is throwing his left hand in the air, the right one coming up to grab the back of his neck. Lucas has a strange look on his face. This is what is distracting Dustin--not that Lucas and Mike are fighting, because they fight all the time, and not that Mike is being a drama queen, because Mike is *always* a drama queen. Dustin can't quite put his finger on it, but there's something weird about it--

"No murders," El finally says, as Mike turns back towards Lucas and says something.

"Oh, wow, that's a shocker," Will snickers, and Lucas and Mike suddenly lunge for each other and roll out of Dustin's immediate line of sight.

"Oh my *god* ," Dustin says, rocketing to his feet.

Will startles. "What?" he says. "Is there something?" He and El are

also standing within half a second. “Did you see something?”

“No!” Dustin squeaks. *Oh my god!* he thinks hysterically, turning robotically and not entirely of his own volition to stare at El.

“What?” she says. The spoon is sticking out of the corner of her mouth and her eyes have gone slightly narrowed, probably because she’s reading his mind. Shit! *MIKE’S SOCKS* .

“What about Mike’s socks?” El says suspiciously, her eyebrows falling down tightly over her eyes.

“Nothing!” Dustin says. “I mean! Don’t you think they’re too big to wear all the time?” His voice is still high-pitched but he can’t really, like, control that. Better to think in small steps.

“I don’t know,” El says. “I would guess that Mike buys socks that fit him just fine.”

“Aren’t those Mike’s?” Dustin asks, looking down at her ankles, sticking out of her sneakers in two thin pillars of blue and green stripes.

El also looks down at her feet. “No?” she says. “These are Jim’s.”

“Oh,” Dustin says. “Weird. Didn’t know Jim and Mike bought the same socks.”

“Does it-matter?” Will asks. “Speaking of, where is Mike? We called this stupid Castle Byers meeting for him.”

“Who knows?” Dustin asks brightly. He drops immediately back onto the ground, trying not to wince to betray how much he’s just bruised his butt on a rock. “Probably, uh, on his way. Where’re the rest of the spoons, I’m starving.”

As Dustin is pathetically grateful to find out mere milliseconds after stuffing a spoonful the size of a fist into his mouth, Mrs. Byers’ Tofu Lentil Surprise has, in fact, improved with age and experience. “Huh,” he says, and Will ducks out of the way of the spray of gravy that this engenders.

“Hey!” Will says.

“This is pretty good,” Dustin tells him, and Will’s laughing too hard to tell him to fuck off.

“Try it with the Wonderbread,” El advises, so Dustin rips open the bag of Wonderbread and they all dig in. If there’s not a lot left for Lucas and Mike, that’s what they get for making out in the woods. Dustin’s mouth feels ashy if he even remotely begins to think about it, so he takes the whole thought and shoves it to the side. Luckily, he has a lot of practice at this--the memory of Lucas and Mike mashing their mouths together can go sit in a corner with all of the times Dustin’s found himself staring at El’s thin lips, memorizing the way that they shape around words.

Lucas and Mike emerge what is maybe only a minute or two later, both of them with leaves in their hair. Their mouths are red. Mike is flushed all the way up to his hairline and Lucas’ shirt is rumpled and untucked. To Dustin’s educated eye they might as well have *DEBAUCHED EACH OTHER IN THE WOODS* hanging over their heads in freaking neon letters, but Will and El don’t seem to notice anything weird.

“Hey, losers,” Dustin says, too loud, when they come into the clearing. “Glad you could finally make it.”

“Fuck you, man,” Lucas says. He does a good job trying to do it casually but Dustin can hear trembling in his voice. Like, honestly, how many of them ever managed to keep the various secrets of their youth from their parents is a goddamn mystery. “Is there anything left or did you eat everything?”

“Tofu Lentil Surprise is my favorite,” El says, blinking innocently up at Lucas, and he barks out an unconvincing fake laugh.

“Listen,” Mike says abruptly, “I know why we’re having this meeting. It’s my fault, I’ve been an idiot about Nancy and Steve Harrington getting married.” He turns even more red; he’s now the approximate shade of a second-degree sunburn. “I’m going to apologize to Nancy, and I’m not going to throw any more tantrums. It’s Nancy’s choice and she’s, uh, happy with Steve.”

There's an awkward pause after this; El pulls the spoon out of her mouth for the first time since she'd first begun to shovel food in. "Are you sure?" she asks Mike, in a low tone that seems more suited for private conversations.

"Wow, what did you say to him on the drive over?" Will asks Lucas, laughing, and now Lucas is the one blushing--it's only in his ears that you can really tell, but his hands are clenching by his sides as a more obvious clue.

"Good for you!" Dustin says loudly, clapping his hands together. "This kind of character growth is a good sign, Michael!" Probably once Dustin's panic has cleared he'll have stronger moral feelings re: the ethics of this entire clusterfuck but right now his little rodent brain is only capable of so many complex thoughts and the winning one is to escape, as fast as possible. "Uh, if that means we're done here then I still have time to make it to Aunt Rachel's before dessert--"

"You're a slut for sour cherry pie and an embarrassment to all of us," Will says cheerfully, waving him off, and Dustin sets off back towards the road like a shot. He barely remembers to yell good-bye and it's certain that they're all talking shit about him and his Aunt Rachel's pie behind his back as he leaves.

It probably makes him a bad person for abandoning El to that situation's tender mercies, but Dustin hasn't felt the need to bail this hard since the morning his dad had sat him down, face red and glasses carefully adjusted, to explain what a gene was and how people inherited them. Not that *everything* in Dustin's life comes down to cleidocranial dysplasia, but the sex talk certainly had.

This is worse than the sex talk by a significant margin. This is worse than the *hey I'm psychic now* talk. This is worse than the *I'm possessed by a demon from the Upside Down* talk. The only thing it's not worse than is the time Dustin had to call the police because a guy he thought was a stalker was actually hiding a large chef's knife under his trenchcoat. Which: what does *that* tell you about Dustin's life.

Dustin and Mike have been friends for a long time, so if you look at this from very far away and squint at it, technically Mike has the strongest claim on Dustin's support. This doubles if you add Lucas, whom Dustin has also known for a very long time. Getting up closer on it, though, it's El who's the victim of this. Dustin should side with the person who's getting hurt. But--I mean, if you *really* look at it, Dustin is crazy in love with El and, because he's occasionally a terrible person, he's fantasized about them breaking up and El busting into Dustin's dorm room one Sunday morning and saying *I've realized something important* before they make out on top of Dustin's desk for the rest of the day. The person who's had those thoughts cannot be trusted to react responsibly when the object of his desire finds herself in the middle of a potentially relationship-ending clusterfuck.

"You know what I mean?" Dustin finishes, desperately, through a forkful of Aunt Rachel's sour cherry pie.

"Do you remember when you were young and lied to us about your problems?" his mom says. "I do. That was wonderful. Wasn't that wonderful, honey?"

"Sure was," his dad says. "Slow down, Dusty, you're going to choke."

"Dad!" Dustin says. He does, though, have to pause to cough around a chunk of cherry, so he stops shoveling pie into his mouth and takes a breather. "What should I do?" he asks his mom. Dustin learned how to give smart, practical advice from his mom, who had given Dustin a lot of sit-down talks during his youth when she thought he needed the benefit of an adult's fully-developed frontal lobe. Because of his mom, Dustin was rescued from becoming the second showing of the Michael Wheeler Drama Hour.

Dustin's mom sighs. She's sitting on the other side of the kitchen counter, sorting through catalogs that have come this week and deciding which ones are worth browsing. "Under most circumstances, I would say that it's none of your business, but what's happening with Mike always seems to end up becoming your business."

This is a delicate way of referring to the many time Dustin has almost died. It's downright subtle, coming from Yael Henderson.

“Okay?” Dustin prompts. When his mom looks up from LL Bean to give him a dirty look, he says, “Sorry!” and stabs at the piece of pie his parents had been thoughtful enough to bring for him from Aunt Rachel.

“Do you want to hear this?” his mom asks mildly.

“Yeph!” Dustin says, holding his hand over his mouth to keep the cherry filling from making itself known.

“You sure?”

“ *Yeph* ,” Dustin gurgles.

“You should talk to Mike,” his mom says once she’s satisfied that he’s not going to interrupt her again, “as it is Mike’s responsibility to be honest with his girlfriend.” She flips through the first few pages of the LL Bean catalogue and frowns down at a full-page spread of chamois shirts. “Didn’t you say you needed another one of these, Mark?”

“Oh, yeah, my old one’s a wreck,” Dustin’s dad says, pulling the open-faced catalog across the counters towards himself. “Thanks, Yael. Your mom’s right, Dusty. Give Mike the chance to tell El himself. The last thing that relationship needs is another person.”

“Oh, you mean Lucas?” Dustin says, and then he has to duck out of the way as his dad makes to roll up the catalog and smack him with it. “Joking, joking!”

Dustin’s mom continues, “Mike may be prone to dramatics but he’s not cruel.” She’s ignoring the flagrant example of child abuse happening across the counter, occupied in throwing the Lands End catalog directly into the recycling bin. “Your talk might even spur him into having a discussion he’s otherwise avoiding. But you shouldn’t talk to El yourself. More people might end up hurt that way, Dustin.”

Dustin’s at this point hunched protectively over his slice of pie, even though his dad’s holding the LL Bean catalog up to his nose, probably trying to decide between the different color options. He’s going to get

the grey. He *always* gets the grey option. “Yeah,” Dustin says, once he’s had a second to think through what his mom is saying. “I mean--that’s a really good idea. Just talk to Mike about it! Why didn’t I think of that?”

In lieu of a response, his mom just audibly scoffs.

~

The fourth time that Dustin calls the Wheeler’s house and somebody from Mike’s extended family answers and says, clearly annoyed, “Michael’s not home,” before hanging up on him, Dustin decides to take matters into his own hands.

He breaks into the Wheeler’s house first, to cover his bases. Is it technically breaking in if you have a key? Dustin’s key to the basement door was Nancy’s Christmas gift the year that they’d all turned fourteen--“Mike told me you’ve been climbing up to my window since I left for school, and that can’t be good for Dustin’s chest,” she’d said, as simultaneously practical and crushing as always--so it’s not like he stole the key, even.

The basement is devoid of life but there’s a kind of fort set-up in the corner by the stairs that means Mike’s sleeping down here while his grandparents get his room. Dustin kicks around the blankets for a few seconds but doesn’t unearth anything that might clue him in as to where Mike’s spending his days. It obviously isn’t down here, as Dustin can’t find any empty candy wrappers or other indicators of Mike eating his emotions.

The next few stops are drive-bys, literally, because Dustin’s borrowed his parents’ car for the afternoon with the promise that he’d pick up bananas and another carton of eggs. Mike’s not at Castle Byers, he’s not at Alley Cat Comics or Jimmy John’s, and he’s not mournfully lurking in the parking lot of Lucas’ sweet summer internship. It’s edging on 6pm by then and the parking lot at the water plant’s main office is looking a bit sparse, so Dustin guns it over to the movie theater on Main and spies Lucas and Mike’s bikes chained to the NO PARKING sign in front of the Ace Hardware.

Pathetically predictable, honestly.



“Heyyy Macy,” Dustin says, oozing up to the box office.

Macy, who does not look up, obnoxiously pops her Double Bubble balloon and says, “Scram, Henderson. Or are you going to actually buy a ticket this time?”

“I’m not staying,” Dustin assures her. “Are Mike and Lucas here?”

“Did you try projecting the bat signal from the top of the sheriff’s station?” Macy suggests. She shifts around a little to make it more obvious that she’s reading her romance novel--Dustin can clearly see the words “Lord MacDuff’s heaving chest”--and thus ignoring him.

“Cute,” Dustin says. “Seriously, Macy, are they in there?”

“It’s a *Star Wars* triple, what do you think?” Macy says, disgusted. “They were here early.” She looks up at Dustin and starts blowing the kind of bubble that had won Macy a lot of respect during recess when they were eight. It’s her way of showing social dominance, like the mouth-breathers that used to shove Dustin into his locker--before he became friends with El, that is.

“I really gotta talk to Mike,” Dustin tries, authoritative, and Macy rolls her eyes, her bubble not for one single second slowing its rate of expansion. “Please,” Dustin wheedles, shifting on a dime to whining. “It’s an emergency.” Macy raises an eyebrow. “Seriously! An emergency! C’mon, Macy!”

Dustin can see the exact moment that Macy loses interest in this conversation; her eyes roll, her bubble pauses and then begins to deflate with an audible *snick*, and then she huddles back down over her romance novel.

“Thanks!” Dustin says, making a break for the door to the lobby of the theatre before she changes her mind.

“I expect five free rentals,” Macy says. “If you stay for the next one I’m sending Jeff in to kick you out.”

Dustin will be afraid of that creepy old usher on a cold day in hell but he throws a placating hand behind him and busts his ass for Theatre Four, in the back by the arcade games, which is where they normally

stuff the double and triple features. Dustin eases the door open and slips in just as the *Falcon* is being trapped by the Death Star's tractor beam and pulled inexorably towards peril. Dustin pauses for a brief second, as a show of respect, and then scoots into the back row to the left. Mike and Lucas are all the way against the wall, heads together and sharing a jumbo bucket of popcorn that's nearly half-empty. Dustin feels like he's just caught his mom in flagrante delicto at a Motel 8.

"I can't believe you," Dustin hiss-whispers, throwing himself down into the seat next to Mike, who jerks up and nearly kicks the bucket of popcorn into the empty seat in front of him.

"Dustin?!" Mike chokes.

"Don't even bother," Dustin says bitterly. "I can't believe this."

Lucas, on the other side of Mike, reaches out to steady the popcorn. "Dustin, we--uh--" he tries.

"*Do not*," Dustin says, poking his index finger into Mike's face and then swinging it over towards Lucas. "What is this?!"

Mike looks towards the screen, swallowing audibly. "It's, uh, the yearly triple feature," he says, lamely.

"Oh, that's rich," Dustin says. "You're telling *me* about the yearly *Star Wars* triple feature? But forget about that--why are you here all alone back in the *make out row*?"

Lucas, washed out by the light of the projected screen, looks suddenly bloodless.

"Ha!" Dustin barks. "That's right! I know!"

"How the hell do you--what do you *know*?" Mike hisses. He's shaking; Dustin can hear the popcorn rattling around wetly in its pool of butter.

"Will you *shut up*?" somebody closer to the screen says.

"Hey, a little respect, buddy," somebody else says.

"I know what's going on here, that's what I know," Dustin tells them. "I don't know how you thought you could keep it a secret, but I've known the whole time. And I just want to say: I can't believe that you would dare."

"Hey!" Lucas says, but it's more weak than indignant.

"Don't!" Dustin replies, rocketing to his feet. "I can't believe this kind of behavior coming from you, Lucas. Mike's always been two steps out of an episode of *General Hospital* but I thought you were more sensible." The music shifts suddenly in time with this accusation; Obi-Wan and Darth Vader are about to begin their iconic battle. Dustin takes a moment to bitterly think that this scene is going to be ruined forever, and then he says, "Talk to El or I will, Michael."

"What?" Mike squawks.

Dustin says, "You heard me!" with more moral confidence than he really feels.

"Seriously, shut up, man," says somebody.

"Spoilers, Obi-Wan loses," Dustin shouts back at him, and before there's time for anything other than some aggressive rustling from a few rows down and somebody boo-ing, Dustin makes a strategic retreat back to his car. He only realizes when he's driven back home and parked, seething mad, that he's forgotten to stop for bananas.

~

Dustin spends Saturday seething some more, in a righteous way--he sleeps through his parents going to temple and then wakes up long enough to eat a sandwich before going back to bed to sleep through their afternoon bridge group--and then Sunday he wakes up early and agrees to take Maria's double when she calls, panicked, because he's sick of his own face as well as the treachery of his friends.

He's restocking returns in a way that is neither seething nor righteous--there's something about Blockbluster that's uniquely good at the leaching of emotions--when the sensor at the door beeps and in strides Nancy Wheeler, five-foot-three and a hundred pounds soaking

wet, looking like Attila the Hun on crack.

“*Shit*,” Dustin whispers, and he reflexively ducks down behind the FANTASY/SCI-FI display.

“Hello, welcome to Blockbuster,” Dustin hears Chanel chirp from behind the register. “Can I help you find something?”

“Yeah, I’m looking for Dustin,” Nancy says.

“Oh, he’s restocking,” Chanel tells her. “He’s probably back near the New Releases M-N?”

It feels like Robin Williams is staring a burning hole directly between Dustin’s shoulderblades. Damn Chanel and her extremely observant nature. “Hey, Nance!” Dustin stands up and yells. “Back here!”

“Thanks,” he hears her say--presumably to Chanel--and then a few seconds later she comes around the corner, which gives Dustin enough time to try to look busy stuffing three more copies of *Mrs. Doubtfire* in behind the front display case.

“Hey,” she says immediately, “sorry for bothering you at work.”

“Oh, yeah, such a big deal, restocking at Blockbuster,” Dustin tells her, rolling his eyes. He’s trying hard to seem totally normal and not at all like a person who cornered her little brother in a movie theater to yell at him about cheating on his girlfriend--an act that might as well have been, Dustin now realizes, pulled straight from the playbook of one Michael Wheeler.

“A job is a job,” Nancy says. “I wanted to talk to you about Mike, and the wedding. You can keep working, it’s okay, I’ll make it quick.”

Dustin is having a hard time looking at her without feeling guilt crash over him, so he focuses on the cart of videocassettes and says, “Sure!” in a hopefully not incriminatingly squeaky way.

“Mike hates Steve, I know that,” Nancy begins, which is the kind of strong start that Dustin should’ve expected from her. “It’s fine, don’t bother, we both know it’s true,” she continues when Dustin opens his mouth to weakly protest. “I thought things were going better--we had

dinner the other night and Mike was really great, he didn't say anything snide about Steve--and then this morning he told me that he got in contact with Jonathan."

Dustin freezes in the act of sorting through a pile of cases labeled *MIGHTY DUCKS, THE* . "Uh," he says.

"Mike said," Nancy continues, sounding slightly brittle, "that he's apparently learned that bottling feelings up can only hurt people, and that the best way to resolve these issues is to talk about them."

Dustin can't think of anything to do but stare at Nancy, his mouth slightly open. He drops a case of *MIGHTY DUCKS, THE* and doesn't bend down to pick it up. "Oh," he says, with the kind of intelligent pizzazz that others have come to expect from him.

"I'm not--bottling up my feelings!" Nancy tells Dustin, who had once wanted to be in the kind of relationship with Nancy where she spoke honestly with him about her feelings but in the here and now wants to die. "I don't--Jonathan is my *friend* , and I love him. As my friend. If this is some kind of convoluted plot of Mike's to break up my wedding, I want to know about it." She's staring at Dustin with a combined look of terror and frustration. With mounting dread, Dustin realizes that he knows exactly what's happening here.

He lets out a deep breath and puts a hand on top of his stock cart. "Nancy," he begins, and she frowns at him.

"Is that your come to Jesus voice?" she demands.

"Nancy," Dustin continues, "Mike isn't trying to break up your wedding. Or, well, he is, because he hates Steve, but he's trying to connect with you right now because he's similarly conflicted about his feelings. You figured out who was right for you; Mike wants to do the same thing."

Nancy half-gasps and squeaks, "He and El are breaking up?"

Dustin circles an index finger in her direction and then raises it towards the ceiling. "This prime gossip is shelved for the time being, please zip it," he says. "Mike doesn't like asking you for help but he

needs your help. Obviously you didn't make a pro/con list and decide between Steve and Jonathan, but--" He pauses when he sees the look on her face. "Oh my god did you *really* make a pro/con list ?"

"No!" Nancy says.

"You did! You totally did!" Dustin says. "I can't believe this! You're the biggest nerd I've ever met!"

"It was not a pro/con list!" Nancy insists loudly, crossing her arms tightly. "It was a--reasoned evaluation of my feelings and the feelings of everybody involved, okay?" She is clearly sensitive about this, so Dustin refrains from probing her for more details. "Anyway that's not the point. Are you saying that Mike wants to bond with me over breaking up with his girlfriend?"

Dustin squints and shrugs. "Basically," he says. "Mike's being weird and trashy about this. If you help him salvage something out of this situation, maybe he'll refrain from sabotaging your wedding as an expression of gratitude."

"Mike's a sociopath," Nancy says bitterly.

"Mike is not a sociopath," Dustin corrects her, "he's just a person who is bad at processing feelings." Dustin is taking a gamble here, but he feels pretty confident about it after years of coaching his friends through their various issues. "He's not the only one. How freaked out were you when Mike said he called Jonathan?"

"Uh," Nancy says, and then she barks an aborted laugh.

"Maybe talk to Jonathan before you get married," Dustin tells her. He has a feeling that Nancy's about to start crying and feel weird about it, so he bends down to pick up the videocassette that's still on the floor. "I'm not saying break off the wedding, or anything, but if you're that freaked out then clearly it's something you need to deal with." He shoves *MIGHTY DUCKS, THE* in behind the display case and pretends to be occupied with shuffling the rest of his cart.

After a few seconds, Nancy says, watery, "Good come to Jesus talk, Dustin." She loops an arm around his neck and yanks him into a

sideways hug.

Dustin sighs, pats her on the back twice, and says, "I'm Jewish. But you're welcome."

~

Between wedding planning, some kind of job retreat at the water treatment plant, and El and Hop's annual camping trip, the only person that Dustin sees the week prior to the wedding is Will, who is working shifts at Ace Hardware similar to Dustin's and apparently completely out of the loop. They play a lot of Mortal Kombat, eat their weight in Funyuns, and don't talk about their feelings. It's a very cleansing experience.

Dustin's looping his tie for the fourth time, standing on his front porch and thinking in a semi-hysterical and listless way about Hop's socks, when El pulls to the curb in front of the house and waves. "Oh," Dustin says to his parents, "there's my ride. Shoot, dammit, fuck this tie."

"Dammit, come *here*," his mother hisses and she yanks him closer by Dustin's pathetic attempt at a knot, nearly choking him in the process. "Mark, hold my drink."

Dustin's dad takes her martini and puts it on the wicker side table next to the loveseat as Dustin's mom rapidly undoes his crumpled mess and twists it into a neat knot with a few flicks of her fingers. In Dustin's defense, the last time he wore a tie was literally his bar mitzvah. He didn't even wear one to his cousin Debbie's bat mitzvah a year later; Aunt Rachel had withheld the sour cherry pie for months in retribution for that.

"Ow, mom," Dustin says as she rockets it up to his chin. "Was that really necessary?"

"Be good," his mom replies, in a threatening but mild kind of way.

"Like I'm never good!" Dustin protests. He steps back to smooth his tie. "How do I look?"

After giving him a critical head-to-toe evaluation, his mom says,

“Fine. Have fun. Don’t say anything mean to Mike’s grandmother.”

“She’s crazy!” Dustin gripes, but he flaps a hand at his mom and says, “I know, I know, I won’t. See you, I don’t know when I’ll be home.”

His dad says something along the lines of, *doesn’t that sound familiar* , under his breath as Dustin shoves his arms into the sleeves of his jacket and takes off down the steps. El is waiting patiently, both hands still on the wheel, and the door unlocks when Dustin’s close enough to put his hand over the latch. “Hey,” he says, feeling protective of the jagged edges of her feelings as he scoots into the seat. “How’s it going?”

“Fine,” El says. It could be because she’s still pissed off about Mike, or it could just be El, always short on words. She doesn’t *look* particularly desolate.

“You look nice,” Dustin adds a second later. She does--green dress, her hair hooked over her ears but shinier than it usually is, mouth painted a soft red color. Her shoulders have freckles. Dustin looks immediately forward, down the street, eyes straining as he looks for a sign of Aunt Rachel’s dumb dog ready to jump to his death in the middle of the street.

“Thank you,” El says. After she turns on the car and disengages the parking break, she adds, “You too.”

“Thanks,” Dustin says. It might come out a little strangled. He coughs and hooks a finger in the loop of his tie around his neck. “Uh, you know how to get there?”

El says, “Yes,” and then, “put your seat belt.”

Dustin’s brain feels like a million rabbits are running around inside of it, thoughts too slippery and frantic to hold onto for long. He gets into a weird zone state that he barely manages to shake when they pull into the parking lot of Mama Louisa’s Italian Restaurant and Events. There’s a crowd in the back garden, milling around a bunch of folding chairs. Dustin can hear the hum of soft classical music, the clinking of glasses, people talking to each other with the bright edge that comes from being happy. Dustin is overwhelmed by it and he’s



not even psychic.

“Hey,” he says to El, “you good with this?”

El looks out into the crowd of people wearing heels and floral dresses and pale dress shirts, pausing in the act of undoing her seat belt. “Yes,” she finally says. “It’s not as bad as you think, Dustin.”

“What?” he says. He pulls down the visor to check in the mirror that his mom hasn’t done something super dickish like leave a lipstick imprint on his cheek. She’d done that the first day of freshman orientation, when she and his dad had set off back for Hawkins and left him to the tender mercies of his RA and a bunch of ice-breaking activities for his floor. “Nancy getting hitched? C’mon, El, I haven’t had a crush on her in years. If this is going to be bad for anybody, it’s Jonathan. Nancy said Mike promised he wouldn’t even throw a tantrum, if you can believe it.”

“That’s not it,” El says.

“Yeah, I don’t believe it either,” Dustin tells her. No lipstick prints, good. He flips the visor back up to the roof of the car.

“No,” El says. “I mean, the...” She trails off until Dustin looks at her, and then she circles a finger in the air next to her temple. “It doesn’t even happen that often. Since I stopped having to use it, it’s--gone away, mostly. Unless somebody’s shouting.”

Dustin says, “Oh,” in probably a strangled and not-normal way. Good to know he’s been giving himself moderate-to-severe aneurysms for the last three years for no good reason. “That’s, uh. Good! For the wedding!”

El stares at him for a long second. It’s the look that for the last few years had given Dustin the impression that she was reading his mind. It’s hardly his fault that he’s thought that--it’s so considering and serious, the same way that El treats her strange superpowers. “We should go,” she finally says. “They’re going to start soon.”

“How do you know that if you’re not super psychic?” Dustin asks, full of suspicion, as they get out of the car.

“Because it’s 2:58 and the invitation said that the service would start at three,” El says. “Oh, there’s Lucas.”

Yeah, there’s Lucas. *And Mike* . They’re talking to Mike’s not-crazy grandmother and holding hands.

“You guys talked, right?” Dustin asks her in an undertone. Mike’s totally pink-faced, it’s hilarious, but Dustin pushes down his immediate urge to heckle mercilessly. “About--all this. And stuff. Are you okay?”

El flicks Dustin a look out of the corner of her eye. “Yes?” she says. “Stop asking.” She’s smiling, though, so she can’t be too mad about it.

“Okay, good,” Dustin says. “Because if you weren’t okay, we could leave. We could be the best-dressed people at Jimmy John’s.”

“Shut up, Dustin,” El says, and then she laughs.

~

“I can’t believe you made *Jonathan* come here from *South America* ,” Dustin hisses at Mike when he finally manages to corner him during the reception. They’ve been cut loose for the fun stuff and Lucas and El, the most competent physical specimens in their friend group, are dancing with actual skill and enthusiasm out in a pack of Wheelers and Harringtons.

Mike makes a little angry noise. “Hey!” he says. “I didn’t make him come! And anyway he was in Philadelphia.”

“That’s nearly as bad,” Dustin says. “I can’t believe you. Are there no depths to which you will not plumb to destroy your sister’s happiness?”

“Ugh,” Mike says. He’s holding a bottle of Old Elk by the neck and looks shiftily, maybe even guilty, so Dustin moves to box him in more efficiently against the gift table. “I wasn’t *destroying* ,” he says, rolling his eyes. “She missed him, it was obvious.” After a moment he adds, angrily, “Harrington too, okay? They both missed him.”

It takes a few seconds for that one to land. “Oh my *god* ,” Dustin

whisper-shrieks at Mike. “Seriously? How did I not know?”

“Nobody knew!” Mike whisper-yells back. “Not even me, thank god.” He makes a little disgusted face. “I don’t want to know *now*, okay, it’s way too much information.”

Dustin is reeling. “It all makes so much sense,” he says to himself, clawing at his own face. “I can’t believe I never saw it. How long has this been happening? Is this why he moved to London?”

“He moved to London to work for David Attenborough, okay, it wasn’t some broken-hearted drama thing,” Mike says disdainfully, which is extremely hypocritical coming from him.

“Yeah, okay, because there are no people making nature documentaries in the United fucking States,” Dustin says. He can’t help rolling his eyes at this; it’s truly incredible that Mike is this dumb. “Of *course* it was a broken heart! And you brought him back!”

Mike looks down into his beer and swallows about half of it. “I guess,” he says sulkily.

“You did!” Dustin grabs Mike by the upper arms and shakes him. “You did something nice! For Harrington!”

“*Ugh*,” Mike says. “Don’t say that so loudly, somebody will hear you. I did it for Nancy.”

Dustin’s mind is so blown that he feels like his eyes are rolling around in his head of their own volition. Maybe he shouldn’t have had that second glass of champagne? Whatever, if he hadn’t had it then he would’ve sloppily cried all over himself during Nancy’s speech about family and sharing life moments and it would’ve been extremely embarrassing. “Is this like a karma thing?” he asks Mike, dazed. “Did you do this to karmically make up for what you did to El?”

Mike says, “What did I do to El? I didn’t even make her meet Grandma Mae!”

“Oh, that’s rich,” Dustin yells at him, because it’s apparently a hair turn from reeling to furious when your brain is full of bubbles. “You

cheated on her with Lucas!”

Mike makes his offended kettle noise. “I did not!”

“Did too!” Dustin says. “I saw you in the woods before the Castle Byers meeting.”

“I didn’t *cheat on El*,” Mike says. “We weren’t even together anymore!”

“Did you tell her that?” Dustin demands, feeling nasty, and Mike’s whole face turns red.

“She broke up with me, asshole,” he says. “Ugh! Is this why you told me and Lucas we were morally reprehensible?”

“I never said that!” Dustin says. “When did I call you morally reprehensible?”

“At *Star Wars*,” Mike says. “Creepy usher Jeff kicked us out before *The Empire Strikes Back*, by the way.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you were distraught at having to make out behind the Ace Hardware dumpster instead of in the back row,” Dustin says snidely. “And I said that *you* were being terrible for cheating on El with Lucas. Also it’s gross to make out during the most important film of our age, you know that it’s sacred. That’s like me making out with somebody on top of the Torah.”

“First of all,” Mike says, “I would never disrespect *Star Wars*. How dare you.”

“I dare plenty,” Dustin sneers.

“*Second of all*,” Mike thunders, “El broke up with me like days before the Castle Byers meeting. And anyway--look, *not* that it’s your business, but we were anyway kind of--you know. Slowing down.”

“It’s totally my business,” Dustin says, “because both of you are my friends and we’ve all saved each other from being murdered too many times to care about politeness. And also, what do you mean, slowing down?”

Mike's still flushed but it looks more like embarrassment now than anger. His eyes are focused on the floor to Dustin's left. "El's a girl," he says.

"Yeah, and?" Dustin says snottily.

"Yeah *and* nothing," Mike says. "El's a girl. I'm not--so into girls. Or it's just that I'm, you know." Literally his entire face is red. He looks like a tomato with an unfortunately Spock-like haircut. "Into Lucas," he finishes.

"Did you purposefully schedule this gay awakening so that it would have the maximum potential to derail Nancy's wedding?" Dustin asks him, and Mike pinches his arm. "Ow!"

"Fuck you!" Mike says. He's looking at Dustin again so at least he's not embarrassed anymore.

"It just sounds like you!" Dustin points out in his own defense. "I can't believe I gave you kudos for getting Jonathan to come to this circus."

"Don't you have anything to say about me being gay, then?" Mike demands.

Dustin says, "Whatever, I'm just glad you didn't cheat on El."

"That's it?!"

"Yeah, yeah, congrats on figuring out your massive crush on Lucas, my sympathies for when he inevitably leaves you for Jeff Goldblum--ow , Mike, stop pinching me!"

~

Probably Dustin and Mike are the only ones who notice, but Jonathan slips out three or four minutes before everybody is funneled out onto the sidewalk in front of Mama Louisa's to throw rice at Nancy and Steve. Dustin occupies himself with wondering if Jonathan's locked himself in the trunk of their JUST MARRIED car--probably not; it's Steve Harrington's extremely douchey *I'm a fancy Chicago lawyer* sportscar so Dustin's not even sure that all of

Jonathan's six foot fuck you could fit in the trunk--or if he's just rendezvousing with them at their hotel. Either way, all's well that ends with nobody exiling themselves to Brazil to sadly photograph plants.

El suddenly appears at Dustin's shoulder as he chucking the last of his rice at Nancy and Steve. "Why are we throwing rice?" she asks in a low voice. She's looking at her little plastic bag of it like it's going to blow up in her face.

"It's a fertility thing," Dustin says. "The more you land on them the better. It's for good luck! And babies."

"Nancy hates babies," El points out.

"That's why it's hilarious," Dustin assures her, and she dutifully sprinkles some out into the air as people shriek with laughter and drunken cheering. It seems like El's kernels float in the air for longer than anybody else's, that they all follow Nancy and Steve as they run down the steps to their car. As Nancy throws herself into the passenger's seat, everybody starts clapping and Dustin joins in.

"This is stupid," El says as Steve guns it and his idiot car roars out of the parking lot. There's a lot of rice on the ground now and people are milling around, clinging to the last of the party high. "Why not throw flowers? This is a waste of rice."

"Weddings are designed to be a huge waste of money, remember?" Dustin says. "I bet there'll be some cake left, do you want to go find it?"

El's mouth quirks in the corner. "I didn't like it," she says, in a soft undertone, like she's confessing to having cheated on an exam. "It had raisins."

Dustin, who would literally murder his mother for carrot cake, says, "Sometimes I just don't understand you, Eleven."

"Let's go get ice cream instead," El suggests, and since Dustin has never met a dessert that he could resist sober, let alone drunk on free champagne, they go Dairy Queen. Mike and Lucas are sitting at the

main table in the dining room of Mama Louisa's surrounded by a sea of empty beer bottles, arguing about something Sylvester Stallone-related that Dustin wants to get into approximately never; Will is nowhere to be found.

"Hooking up with a bridesmaid, I bet, that lucky bastard," Dustin says to himself, and the disgusted look on El's face suggests that this is probably true.

The DQ over by the high school is always where the junior and senior prom after-parties end up--as well as the band and orchestra concerts, which Dustin had actually attended himself, as opposed to prom--so it's not like Dustin and El are the best-dressed people to have ever blown in at 11pm on a Saturday. They don't feel out of place at all.

Even the shitty fluorescent lights and the peculiar smell of burned meat and boiled milk doesn't despoil the image of El, in her pretty green dress, chowing down on her chocolate dip cone with single-minded determination. Dustin gets a cup of twist with sprinkles--he favors the classics--and, in deference to the tie that he'd borrowed from his dad, he tries to eat it as slowly and neatly as possible.

"You talked to Mike," El says just as Dustin's shoved an entire spoonful of sprinkles and soft serve into his mouth; he nearly chokes.

"Uh," he says, garbled by sugar. "I guesph?"

"So you know that we broke up," El continues. She sounds very mild for a person who is presumably talking about something emotionally devastating. "It wasn't emotionally devastating," El says, rolling her eyes. "And you say that Mike is the drama queen."

"I thought you weren't so good at being a psychic!" Dustin gasps, betrayed, pointing at her with his spoon.

"I'm not," El says. "You're just very loud. Why do you think about socks all the time?"

"I like them?" Dustin says weakly, and then, "If you don't want me to think about socks, you should stop wearing ones that are so laughly big." The best defense etc etc.

“Mike is still my friend,” El says, apparently not willing to take this sock thief accusation to heart. “He was my first friend. I didn’t want to date him anymore, and he didn’t want to date me. Because we’re friends we can be honest.”

Since Dustin literally just used this exact line on Mike two hours ago, he can’t exactly protest its veracity, but he still sort of gapes at El for a few seconds. “Wow,” he finally says. “That’s--unexpectedly mature. I’m proud of you guys.”

“Thank you,” El says primly, and then she crunches another piece of chocolate shell between her front teeth. After she chews and swallows it, she says, “Now that I’m not dating Mike, you can ask me out.”

Dustin chokes again. He’s not proud of it.

“Sorry?” he gasps.

“I am single,” El says. “So are you. Aren’t you?” She’s going cross-eyed looking at her half-eaten chocolate dip one second, looking at Dustin quickly the next, and then focusing back on her cone.

“Yes?” Dustin says. A lot has happened tonight and Dustin has drunk a lot of champagne. “I mean, yes, I am single. Uh.”

“Good,” El says. She takes an enormous bite of the top of her pile of half-melted vanilla soft-serve. “So ask.”

“What?” Dustin says, dazed. Her lipstick had held up pretty well during the wedding and reception but it’s failing now under repeated assault from her ice cream. It looks like the inside of her mouth is paler than the outside, like she’s cold or some kind of weird species of fish. It’s a lot sexier than the fish analogy implies; maybe Dustin is currently blackout drunk and hallucinating on the floor of Mama Louisa’s. “Oh! Uh--want to go out some time, with me?”

“Yes,” El says. “I would like that a lot.” Her voice is so small and serious. Dustin is looking at her mouth and he doesn’t have to think about Mike’s socks, only the tiny curl in the corner of her lips; in the near future he might be able to *kiss* her.



Dustin is *so fucked* .